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On Woodrow Wilson



AN address in Louisville
by Robert W. Bingham, State Chairman
of the Woodrow Wilson
Foundation.

JANUARY 13, 1922

C.P.L. 13 Jan., 1928-

The Present, and the Future, Place In History of Woodrow Wilson

The following is the stenographic text of a speech delivered by Robert W. Bingham, owner of The Courier-Journal and The Louisville Times, at a mass meeting at the Municipal Tabernacle January 13, 1922, in the interest of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, of which Mr. Bingham is State chairman:

"Ladies and Gentlemen: I am very much surprised to see so many people here tonight. It is not just exactly the sort of call, it is not just exactly the time, it is not the kind of weather, that might bring together a great concourse. I am surprised at the number here tonight.

"I am not at all surprised at the quality represented in the men and women who are here. You men and women who are here are the people who have been thinking for years as the majority of the American people are beginning to think now, as all Americans should and will think in the future. You are the vanguard. You are the leaders. You are the people who are right now, and have been right and who are to bring the rest of our countrymen also out of the darkness into the light.

"Now, that we may begin this meeting in very good humor, I want to read you a few extracts from speeches made in Congress and from publications in American newspapers:

"'He considers himself sovereign, immaculate, infallible, omniscient. What will posterity say of the man who has done this thing? Will it not say the mask of hypocrisy has been worn by Caesar, by Cromwell, and by him alike? He employs the seclusion of a monk and the supercilious distance of the tyrant. He is cold and reserved. His temper is arbitrary. History yet will tear the page devoted to his praise. The glory that shone around him is dissolved in mist. The enemies of liberty and his country claim him as their own. Posterity will

look in vain for any marks of wisdom in his administration. They will see instead the worst of all diseases that ever were inflicted on a State.'

"Very harsh words. Very strong words. Words with a very familiar sound. But, ladies and gentlemen, they were not said—though of words like that many were said—these words I have read to you were not said of Woodrow Wilson.

"They were said and written of George Washington, the Father of His Country, in 1795 and 1796.

"And those who wrote them and those who said them have died and been forgotten, and the newspapers of that day, and the men and women of that day who said those things were just as wrong as the men and women in the newspapers who said similar things about Woodrow Wilson.

"We can say without immodesty that we do think and do realize and appreciate in advance of many of our countrymen. I do not wish to discuss this subject tonight from any sort of partisan or political point of view. It never should have been confused with politics. It never had any place in political discussions.

"The Treaty and the League, when adopted by all the nations except our own, when signed by our own plenipotentiaries, by our own representatives, was not then Mr. Wilson's Treaty or Mr. Wilson's League, great as had been his part in forming them. It was no man's League or Treaty.

"It was America's Treaty, America's League; the world's Treaty, the world's League; and never should malice or envy or personal antagonism, never should mere political partisanship, have fought them as one man's workmanship. Those who opposed them should have done so only from the standpoint that they were not what our country or the world needed or deserved or should have had. And there were people who had that opinion, quite honestly. But they were very few.

"I belong to a little dinner club here with about twenty members. Most of them, I believe, are affiliated with the Republican party. We had a meeting in December, 1918, and every man there was heartily in favor of the League of Nations. They so expressed themselves.

"And that meeting—because they were educated men and intelligent men and good citizens— really represented the true feeling throughout our country.

"The time came when many of those men, most of them, that were affiliated with the Republican party, changed their opinion on the Treaty and the League. But I still maintain it was not a party question.

"And I still maintain and I am prepared, I believe, to demonstrate that the last election was not a referendum deciding against the Treaty.

"That election turned on many different things. It was influenced by the reaction that our countrymen felt in common with the people of all the allied and other countries, for that matter. There were people who were discontented with taxation. There were people who desired a change—which is a common human desire. But it was not that solemn referendum in the Treaty and the League which Mr. Wilson desired.

"At the Republican convention in June, 1920, I happened to be present. You will remember that for three days the Resolutions Committee was in great travail over this plan in the treaty.

"Among the delegates, through the lobbies, in the hotels, in the streets, during this long period of impatient waiting, the common topic of conversation among those delegates was:

" 'What is going to be our position on the League? Not, 'I am for it,' like a thinking man. Not, 'I am against it,' like a thinking man.

" But, 'what are the high priests going to tell us to think on this subject fraught with so grave consequences both to our country and to the world?' Waiting to be told.

"When that Resolutions Committee came in with its plank on the Treaty it was acclaimed by Mr. Borah, and Mr. Johnson, and all the 'irreconcilable bitter-enders,' as the death of the Treaty. You remember that.

"It was acclaimed by the strong reservationists as meaning ratification with strong reservations. It was acclaimed by the mild reservationists as meaning ratification with mild reservations.

"And it was acclaimed by Mr. Taft, the protagonist, the head, of the League to Enforce Peace, the collaborator with Mr. Wilson in framing the

League of Nations, as meaning ratification anyhow.

"Death; ratification with strong reservations; ratification with mild reservations; ratification anyhow—that is what that platform was said to mean, by members distinguished and undistinguished of the Republican party.

"When Mr. Harding made his speech of acceptance August 28, what he said on that subject was heralded again by the 'bitter-enders' as meaning death to the Treaty; by the strong and mild reservations as meaning ratification on those terms; and again by Mr. Taft as meaning ratification.

"Now, when that difference of opinion existed among those men who were qualified to speak by their affiliation, by their standing in their party, when that complete difference of opinion existed as to what the position of their party was on that momentous subject, surely the rank and file were justified in sustaining grave doubts in their own minds; and surely it cannot be said that on that basis, on a platform so doubtful as that, the American people arrived by a large majority at a decision maintaining the position alone of the 'bitter-enders.'

"As late as October 20, 1920, in the midst of that campaign, Mr. Taft, a Republican ex-President of the United States; Mr. Hughes, the nominee for the Presidency in 1916; Mr. Hoover,—thirty-one of the leading men in the Republican party and in its organization in the United States, over their own names, called on the people of America to vote for Mr. Harding because thus only could they obtain the ratification of the Treaty and the adoption of the Covenant of the League.

"Now, those are facts which cannot be controverted. That is what those men—the president of Princeton; the president of Yale; the president of Cornell; and, in addition, Mr. Hughes and Mr. Hoover and Mr. Taft—that is what those men thought and that is what they said to the American people.

"And again I say, facing and considering and realizing those facts, it is not possible for anyone to maintain, as some attempt to maintain, that that election really expressed the voice, the sentiment, the real judgment of the American people on that subject.

“The voice of the American people on that subject has not yet been heard. The real sentiment of the American people is just really beginning to realize, to apprehend itself. When the real voice of the American people does make itself heard, then our country is going to rise out of the dust of reaction.

“Then our country is going to climb back again to the heights it once occupied in the opinion of mankind. And again our country is going to throw its force and its strength for peace and for freedom and for justice, and stand with the civilized nations of the world to preserve that for which we and they suffered and gave our sons.

“Now, that question was not decided by that election. That question is not a political question. I want to repeat that. And I want to stress it.

“Look at the men and the women, without regard to politics, without regard to any sort of political affiliation, who threw themselves into the war. What did they do it for?

“You men and women here, particularly you men and women who had sons in the service—you did not send them there, and they did not go there, because they were scared rats, afraid not to fight, as he who misrepresents America as our ambassador to England has said.

“You know what you felt. It is not the sort of thing that we can very well express. But you know when you looked at other men and women's sons, when you looked at your own sons, when you thought of what they were going for, the agony in your heart was assuaged by a solemn pride.

“Young eagles, gallant and glorious young Americans fired, inspired, led in a new and a holy crusade. And that is why our sons went to France.

“They went there to make war in order to end war. That is what they were taught at home. That was the message they carried over. And that was the spirit that so led those boys that from the time their feet touched the soil of France they never moved in any direction except forward.

“Now he shames his country, he shames his countrymen—he speaks the basest slander of our sons—who would have Americans think otherwise.

"Did our Navy do well in the War? Did our Army do well in the war? To ask those questions is to answer them.

"But how many times we heard, after the war was won; how many times we heard, after the Germans had surrendered—that everything was rotten and was wrong, everything was a mistake and a failure and even the ideals which had inspired us were nothing.

"That was said, that was written, that was preached about, in our country. It was the product of exaltation, in a way—after all, neither men nor nations can live forever on the heights.

"What a wonderful country we had in November, 1918! What glorious, ardent spirit inspired our people!

"There was no limit to our faith, to our enthusiasm, to our energy. There was no call which went unanswered. What a great country we had in November, 1918—a country which had the confidence and the respect and the gratitude of all the civilized world as no other country had ever had in human history.

"It is to that that Woodrow Wilson led us in 1918.

"How much we have lost!

"We went into the war inspired by a high ideal. So we believed. So Europe believed. We went in to preserve what civilization had so painfully and so bloodily acquired through long centuries of suffering and toil, in the war. That is what we thought and that is what Europe thought.

"And that is why they gave to us that confidence and that gratitude. That is why we had the most glorious opportunity for ourselves, incidentally for the world, that ever came to any people.

"We were unselfish; we were not seeking for ourselves extension of power, territory or wealth. We were at a great distance from the age-long quarrels and differences of the European countries.

"We occupied that supreme position of unselfishness, of disinterestedness, holding the gratitude and the affection of mankind. We lost the greatest opportunity that ever came to a people in the history of the world. We cast it aside. We threw it away.

"We Americans did that thing. Europe is suspicious of us now, and they have a right to be. They say in their

hearts, 'Those were your declarations to the world. Deny them. You promised the influence of your strength, of your power, of your comparatively undiminished resources in money and in men to rehabilitate a broken, nearly ruined world. You did not do it. What sort of people are you Americans?'"

"Supposing England had made that promise to us, that our conditions were reversed. Suppose France had made that promise to us, with conditions reversed, and we had relied on it and we had trusted, and we had undertaken to bear our share of the burden, trusting in the faith of a great people, and they had broken their word?

"What would you and I—French or English—France with 1,500,000 dead; England with 1,000,000 dead—what would you and I, French or English, looking out over those 1,500,000, those 1,000,000 graves of our boys—what would you and I have thought of the United States of America?

"We did wrong! We lost our pride. We betrayed our trust. We turned confidence and affection into distrust and suspicion.

"But still every day is a new day. Still the opportunity is not wholly dead. Still there is a way for America to retrieve her lost honor and her lost prestige.

"There is but one way; and that is, for you and those like you in our country to lead our country back to where we leave the company of the Russian and the Turk and take our place with the fifty-one civilized nations which are now members of the League of Nations.

"I want to read you something else. You know we have a disarmament conference in Washington now.. The League of Nations—on May 12, 1920, to be exactly correct—in the city of Rome established a permanent commission of the League for the specific purpose of carrying out disarmament under the control of the fifty-one signatory nations.

"This conference in Washington is in the right direction. It is directly carrying out one of the fundamental principles of the Covenant of the League. It is a little late. We could have had it two years and more ago; but at any rate it is in the right direction.

"It ought to be supported by all patriotic Americans, men and women.

Let it not be said that anyone of you opposed this move in the right direction because Mr. Harding called it or because Mr. Lodge is one of the plenipotentiaries.

"I tell you, for the first time in my life I find myself in accord with Mr. Henry Cabot Lodge. No; it is the second time. The first time was when he declared that a separate peace with Germany would be an infamy. So I have agreed with Mr. Lodge twice, but I can't say that I want it to become a habit.

"But I do say that if we are not ready for a fifty-two nation Treaty let us have a nine-Power Treaty; if we are not ready for a nine-Power Treaty let us have a four-Power Treaty; if we are not ready to go in the front door let us go in the back door—at any rate up the back stairs and out of the international back yard with the Russian and the Turk. Let us leave that company we have been keeping.

"In the great discussion and great opposition waged around Article X of the Covenant of the League of Nations, there were people who said it meant that our boys would be ordered over to Europe; there were even men not unknown in Kentucky who said that Article X would mean that our sons would be ordered to fight for the throne of the king of Timbuctoo.

"Now the League has been in operation for some time, and successful operation. Let us not forget that. It has served a great and useful purpose. It has not accomplished what it might have accomplished if we had been where we belong. But it has already done a great work.

"It has not called any English boys, or Irish boys, or French boys, or Italian boys, or any boys to fight here or there or for anybody. It has settled burning questions in Europe which might have forced those boys into war but for its existence and its operations.

"I want to read to you two articles. One is Article X, about which that controversy raged at the time when the treaty was under discussion. The other is Article 2 of the present four-Power Treaty, which Mr. Lodge presented the other day and said should be adopted without reservation, although it did appear that Mr. Hughes and Mr. Lodge and Mr. Underwood and Mr. Root had a

different opinion about the meaning of that Treaty from the one maintained by Mr. Harding, who appointed them.

"If the said rights are threatened by the aggressive action of any other Power, the high contracting parties shall communicate with one another fully and frankly in order to arrive at an understanding as to the most efficient measures to be taken jointly or separately to meet the exigencies of the particular situation.

"The associated Powers undertake to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territory, integrity and existing political independence of all of its associates. In case of any such aggression or in case of any threat or danger of such aggression, they shall advise upon the means by which this obligation shall be fulfilled.'

"I left out one or two words, but I have not changed the meaning. 'Arrive at an understanding as to the most efficient measures to be taken jointly or separately to meet the exigencies of the particular situation.' 'Shall advise upon the means by which this obligation shall be fulfilled.'

"Which is Article 2? And which is Article X? There they are: One, dragging our country into foreign wars and destroying the lives of our boys; the other to do precisely the opposite thing. One, opposed by Mr. Lodge; the other, presented by Mr. Lodge with a demand for its passage without reservation.

"And again I ask you, intelligent men and women sitting here: Which one is Article X? Which one is Article 2? You can't tell the difference between them.

"Article 2 ought to be adopted—that was the first one I read; I should not have known it if I had not put it down myself—just as Article X should have been adopted.

"I have not tried—nor, really, do I intend to try—to cover Mr. Wilson's career in any way. I do not intend to try to give any résumé of his achievements. You know them. Our country knows them. The world knows them.

"Most of the time I intend to take here tonight I have devoted to discussing that crowning achievement of his life and of his work, because it is



the crowning achievement not only his life and his work, but the one thing that holds out hope to mankind: because, remember, they have all been tried—balances of power and courts, The Hague Convention—they have all been tried and they have all failed.

“And that is why I have devoted to that subject most of the time I intend to take here tonight.

“This thing that we are proposing to do is not wholly and solely a tribute to Mr. Wilson. It is not wholly or solely for him at all. It is a recognition for us and for the world, to realize what he stood for and what he did; but it is just as much for ourselves and for our country as it is for him.

“And, more, it gives to us an opportunity to regain some of our lost idealism. The world cannot live, the world cannot move, the world cannot progress on any policy of selfish isolation. Men and women cannot live, and they cannot grow on a diet of gross materialism. It is the things not of the flesh but of the spirit that have power, that have vitality, and that have continuity.

“We stumble and falter and fail, but we are never lost if even once in a while we can set our eyes upward and outward and our feet on a path which leads us to work for man, for mankind, and not for ourselves. True glory of men, and the true glory of a people lie in that. It was along that path he led this people.

“They have always stoned the prophets. What they said about Washington, they said about Lincoln. What they said about Washington and Lincoln, they said about Woodrow Wilson. But those who said those things about Washington and Lincoln have died, and are forgotten, and the place in history of those great architects is sacred.

“In that great triumvirate of America there will be recognized by history surely, without any doubt or question, and there will be recognized by those who are to come after us: Washington, who founded this country; Lincoln, who preserved its unity; and him who in the fullness of its power and its strength led it upon the last and the noblest of all the crusades, for freedom, for justice, for peace to all men and to all the world.”

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